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XI.—THE THEME OF *PARADISE LOST*

Lovers of Milton's poetry occasionally note with regret signs that his great epic is losing its influence upon the mind of the race. Hence, any attempt to revive interest in *Paradise Lost* deserves the sympathetic attention of students of literature. Such an attempt is the article of Professor E. N. S. Thompson, *The Theme of Paradise Lost*, printed in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, March, 1913. As I venture to differ from the writer, however, in a number of important particulars, I shall attempt to formulate what seems a more comprehensive view of the meaning of Milton's epic.

But before undertaking this, it might be profitable to consider some of the representative views of scholars and critics; for *Paradise Lost* has been the subject of a vast body of critical writing, and opinions have been expressed almost as varied as those upon *Hamlet*.

The most widely accepted, and what was for a long time the orthodox theory, is that *Paradise Lost* is a theological and historical epic, dealing with human and super-human facts, its action beginning before the creation, and ending with the disposition of things for eternity. Its central conceptions are the truths of Christianity, represented with splendor of language, and in certain portions with wealth of poetic ornament. The attitude of earlier critics who accepted this view was, in the main, one of unstinted admiration. Dennis and Addison may be taken as representatives. Even Dr. Johnson, who was bitterly opposed to Milton on the subject of politics, and out of sympathy with many of the traits of his character, yet reverenced

his achievement in *Paradise Lost*, and mentioned as an undisputed fact that 'the substance of the narrative is truth.'

But with the nineteenth century there came a different view of the universe. Biblical criticism and the advance of scientific knowledge made it impossible for many to accept as literal truth the Biblical account of the creation and the fall. The matter of *Paradise Lost* is consequently to be discarded, and the fame of the poem is to rest upon the sublimity and harmony of its style. The chief representative of this class of critics is Edmond Scherer.

Another variety of the critical opinion which considers that in substance *Paradise Lost* is theological and historical is found in Mark Pattison's work on *Milton*. 'Milton's mental constitution, then, demanded in the material upon which it was to work, a combination of qualities such as very few subjects could offer. The events and personages must be real and substantial, for he could not occupy himself seriously with airy nothings and creatures of pure fancy. Yet they must not be such events and personages as history had portrayed to us with well-known characters, and all their virtues, faults, foibles, and peculiarities. And, lastly, it was requisite that they should be the common property and the familiar interest of a wide circle of English readers.'¹

Again, 'The world of *Paradise Lost* is an ideal, conventional world, quite as much as the world of the *Arabian Nights*, or the world of the chivalrous romance, or that of the pastoral novel. Not only dramatic, but all, poetry is founded on illusion. We must, though it be but for the moment, suppose it true. We must be transported out of the actual world into that world in which the given scene

¹ Pattison's *Milton*, p. 177.

is laid.'² The inconsistency in these passages is significant; the writer seems to be following two divergent paths, historical accuracy, and purely literary appreciation.

A second class of critics, who believe that the Biblical account of the creation and the fall is a myth, yet who have been deeply impressed by the grandeur of Milton's epic, have resorted to another method of interpretation. Assuming that Milton's avowed purpose to

assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men

was a misconception of the true spirit of his undertaking, they consider the epic to be chiefly symbolic and poetic. On this view, the poet himself may not be fully conscious of his own deeper meaning.

Among this class are those who hold that the subject of the poem is the revolt of Lucifer; that Satan is the hero; and the central idea, the struggle of liberty against authority.

The romantic poets of the nineteenth century, especially Byron and Shelley, accepted this interpretation; and it is congenial to the more recent idealization of the Superman. Readers of Jack London will recall in *The Sea-Wolf* the admiration of Wolf Larsen for those passages in which Satan is the dominating figure.

A contemporary essayist holds that the 'True theme is Paradise itself'; that the profound value and interest of the epic resides in its poetic realization of the ideal of pastoral literature in the portrayal of the Eden bower.³

Another contemporary believes that *Paradise Lost* is an allegory dealing with the political, religious, and social

² Pattison's *Milton*, p. 183.

³ P. E. More, *Shelbourne Essays*, p. 239.

conditions of Milton's own time; ⁴ that Satan is the hero, or better, the villain of the poem; that he represents the Roman Church; that the creation of Adam and Eve symbolizes the Protestant Christian world; that the description of Adam and Eve in the Eden bower is "a remarkable picture of the ideal Puritan combination of Church and State"; that Michael represents Cromwell and pure religion.

Finally, there is the article already mentioned of Prof. E. N. S. Thompson. He maintains that *Paradise Lost* is not concerned with history or theology, but is symbolic. The poet 'sees beneath the "fable" certain enduring truths regarding man's relations to the opposed forces of good and evil. . . . Milton's theme is philosophical, not historical or theological.'

In brief, Professor Thompson seems to consider *Paradise Lost* simply an allegory embodying an idealistic system of ethics, accepting as fact the existence of evil, and emphasizing the enduring truth of free-will, and the possibility of the ultimate triumph of good.

That this is an inspiring and, from one point of view, a justifiable interpretation will be readily granted; but it does not seem to me the whole truth of the matter, nor does it approach as near to historical accuracy as may reasonably be expected. After a glance at the different theories of *Paradise Lost* enumerated above, one is impressed by the necessity of caution in accepting a theory, especially an allegorical interpretation of Milton's epic. And at the start we should keep in mind the distinction between allegory and allegorizing. Allegory is fiction consciously framed by its author as a means of expressing abstract ideas. Allegorizing is a process of allegor-

⁴ Rev. H. G. Rosedale, *Milton Memorial Lectures*, pp. 109-10.

ical interpretation by subsequent critics. The safest method of approach is doubtless the historical one. What did the poem mean to the author and his contemporaries? Then, in the light of their interpretation, what can it mean to us? On this method special weight should be given to the text of the epic itself; to Milton's essay on *Christian Doctrine*, in which he expressed abstractly conceptions which he represented concretely in *Paradise Lost*, and to the criticism of contemporaries or immediate successors, who, partaking of Milton's general attitude toward man, nature, and God, would probably share his views of the significance of the poem.

After going over this ground as impartially as possible I cannot avoid the conclusion that in composing *Paradise Lost* Milton thought he was dealing with real and historical facts. The fundamental matter of his poem is the Christianity of his time as he accepted it. *Paradise Lost* is simply an elaboration of The Christian Epic as outlined by Professor Santayana in Chapter vi of his *Reason in Religion*. I cannot read Milton's prophetically solemn statement of his purpose in Book I without feeling that he meant just what he said; that he was to sing

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.

Professor Thompson states that 'Milton could not write as Hebrew annalist or Christian theologian. He was free to read the Bible as a poet, not a historian, and to interpret it liberally.' Milton's own discussion of The Holy Scriptures in *Christian Doctrine*, Chapter

xxx, gives me an exactly opposite impression. 'The writings of the prophets, apostles and evangelists, composed under divine inspiration, are called the Holy Scriptures.'⁵

'The Scriptures, therefore, partly by reason of their own simplicity, and partly through the divine illumination, are plain and perspicuous in all things necessary to salvation, and adapted to the instruction even of the most unlearned, through the medium of diligent and constant reading.'⁶ 'No passage of Scripture is to be interpreted in more than one sense.'⁷ The author, however, allows exceptions to this rule. 'The rule and canon of faith, therefore, is Scripture alone.'⁸ 'Lastly, no inferences from the text are to be admitted, but such as follow necessarily and plainly from the words themselves, lest we should be constrained to receive what is not written for what is written, the shadow for the substance, the fallacies of human reasoning for the doctrines of God, for it is by the declaration of Scripture, and not by the conclusions of the schools that our consciences are bound.'⁹ Milton's literal interpretation of the Scriptures is evidenced throughout this work. He evidently accepts the Biblical account of the creation and the fall, and the miracles;¹⁰ and he believes in the reality of angels, good and evil.¹¹

The tendency of the nineteenth and twentieth century mind is directly away from this point of view. The story of the creation and the fall is now generally regarded as a myth, and the doctrine of the verbal inspira-

⁵ *C. D.*, p. 437.

⁹ *C. D.*, p. 443.

⁶ *C. D.*, p. 440.

¹⁰ *C. D.*, pp. 169, 253.

⁷ *C. D.*, p. 442.

¹¹ *C. D.*, p. 213.

⁸ *C. D.*, p. 445.

tion of the Scriptures has been largely discarded. But there is no reason for crediting Milton with views of science of which men had at that time hardly begun to dream.

As a suggestive classification of Milton's outlook, the history of myths might be divided into three stages. At first there is the era of unquestioning belief. Later, in a more sophisticated time, there arise doubts and differences of opinion, and the corresponding necessity of explanation and apologetics. Finally, in a scientific or philosophic age, the myth is either entirely discarded, or, by an allegoristic interpretation, is made the artistic medium for the presentation of some significant truth. According to the present writer, Milton lived in an age of transition from the first to the second period. But the modern interpreters, ignoring the vast changes which two centuries have made in the mental life of the race, have proceeded summarily to classify Milton with themselves.

Professor Thompson, in support of his contention that Milton 'values the rebellion of Lucifer and the sin in Eden not as historical fact but as symbolical of moral truth,' cites *Paradise Lost* 5. 570-576.

Yet for thy good
This is dispensed; and what surmounts the reach
Of human sense I shall delineate so,
By likening spiritual to corporeal forms,
As may express them best—though what if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things therein
Each to other like more than on Earth is thought!

This species of symbolism Milton explained more definitely in *Christian Doctrine*. 'When we speak of knowing God, it must be understood with reference to the imperfect comprehension of man; for to know God as He really is, far transcends the powers of man's thoughts,

much more of his perception. . . . Our safest way is to form in our minds such a conception of God as shall correspond with his own delineation and representation of himself in the sacred writings.¹² In other words, the superhuman beings are represented as they are in *Paradise Lost*, because that method is in accord with the divinely ordained symbolism of the Scriptures. The use of this symbolism, however, does not negate belief in the reality of the rebellion of Lucifer any more than it does faith in the being of God; but it changes the locus of that reality from the material realm of human perception to the region of the spiritual and the super-sensuous. Milton's description of the revolt of Lucifer is merely adapted to human comprehension; it is a material symbolization of historical facts in the supersensuous world. This symbolism, of course, refers not only to events and personages, but also to the moral and spiritual forces which they represent; but the point I wish to emphasize is that the events which Milton narrated through the mouth of Raphael he considered in the main actual events, although their reality was in a different sphere from that which is possible to human perception.

This theory, if true, exonerates Milton from many of the charges of inconsistency in his narrative; such as his anthropomorphism, and the confusion of material and immaterial acts ascribed to the angels.

Not only Professor Thompson's contention that Milton considered the revolt of Lucifer valuable for its symbolism of abstract ideas alone, but also his treatment of Milton's devil as a mere personification of the forces of evil, is lacking in historical perspective. Impossible as the belief in a personal devil is to most people now, it

¹² *C. D.*, pp. 16, 17.

was not so in the age of Milton. 'Throughout the *Old* and *New Testament* the devil figures as a personage free to dwell where he pleases, and to act as he will'; and he is so represented, together with the legions of other evil angels, in Chapter ix of *Christian Doctrine*. Students of the Middle Ages are familiar with the conception of an actual personal devil, the originator and head of the forces of evil in the universe—the prince of the powers of the air—able to assume at will various forms. The modern tendency to attenuate his Satanic Majesty to a mere personification is the last insult. We have only to recall the Salem Witchcraft to be convinced how firm at one time was the conviction of the existence of demonic agencies. Philology as well as history verifies this view. *Ephesians* 6; 12, 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places,' means simply: 'We are fighting against wicked demons of the upper air.'¹³ The transition from the mythological to the modern view of the devil is illustrated in Burns' *Address to the Deil*. Burns was, at least while sober, completely emancipated and able to address the devil with patronizing good humor. But his 'rev'rend grannie' was thoroughly orthodox in her belief, and Burns was, too, when he was drunk.

Turning to the earlier criticism of *Paradise Lost*, not only did the vast body of Milton's contemporaries agree with him that the epic is elaborated upon a basis of historic fact, but the critics, the cultivated men of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries so interpreted it.

¹³ Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, p. 258.

John Dennis wrote of Milton as a modern poet who surpassed all the ancients and all the moderns, because, avail- ing himself of the enthusiasm derived from religion, he wrote under the inspiration of true religion, or Christianity. Dr. Johnson wrote in his life of Milton: 'We all, indeed, feel the effects of Adam's disobedience; we all sin like Adam, and like him must all bewail our of- fenses; we have restless and insidious enemies in the fallen angels, and in the blessed spirits we have guardians and friends; in the redemption of mankind we hope to be included; in the description of heaven and hell we are surely interested, as we are all to reside hereafter either in the regions of horror or bliss.'

The main reason, then, for concluding that Milton believed that his epic was built upon a basis of historic fact is that it was founded upon the Scriptures, which were accepted as revealed truth by Milton and the mass of his contemporaries. But there is another well-known fact in support of this view—Milton's idea of the function of poetic inspiration. In more recent times there has been a division of human faculty; objective truth being given to the domain of science, and the subjective world of imagination and fancy being relegated to the poet. But in Milton's time this division did not exist, and the imagination was considered an organ in the acquisition of truth. Poetry was held by Sidney and the scholars who inherited the theories of classical criticism as a more philosophical and higher thing than history. Milton looked upon his art as a sublime mission. He identified the muse, *Urania*, with the spirit of prophetic inspiration. In discussing the Holy Spirit he wrote:¹⁴ 'It is also used to signify the spiritual gifts conferred by God

¹⁴ *C. D.*, p. 153.

on individuals.' In other words, Milton considered the gift of poetic inspiration as one phase of the Holy Spirit. He selected for his subject truths revealed in the *Old Testament* by God, and he believed himself also a chosen medium of revelation:

Descend from Heaven, Urania, by that name
If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine
Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,
Above the flight of Pegasean wing!
The meaning, not the name, I call; for thou
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
Of old Olympus dwell'st; but, heavenly-born,
Before the hills appeared or fountain flowed,
Thou with Eternal Wisdom didst converse.

Another consideration may help to support the view that Milton believed in the historical reality of the main characters and events of his epic. He is accused of blending incongruously the truths of Christianity with the fictions of pagan mythology. But this objection has been answered by De Quincey. 'To Milton the personages of the heathen Pantheon were not merely familiar fictions, or established poetical properties; they were evil spirits. That they were so was the creed of the early interpreters. In their demonology the Hebrew and the Greek poets had a common ground. Up to the advent of Christ the fallen angels had been permitted to delude mankind. To Milton, as to Jerome, Moloch was Mars, and Chemosh Priapus. Plato knew of hell as Tartarus, and the battle of the giants in Hesiod is no fiction, but an obscured tradition of the war once waged in heaven.'¹⁵ I have already noted how Milton gave the name Urania to the spirit of divine inspiration; and one quotation will, I believe, verify De Quincey's theory:

¹⁵ Quoted by Mark Pattison, *Milton*, p. 198.

The hasty multitude

Admiring entered; and the work some praise,
And some the architect. His hand was known
In Heaven by many a towered structure high,
. . . Nor was his name unheard or unadored
In ancient Greece; and in Ausonian land
Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell
From Heaven they fabled, thrown by Angry Jove
Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day, and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith, like a falling star,
On Lemnos, the *Æ*gean isle. Thus they relate,
Erring; for he with this rebellious rout
Fell long before.¹⁶

Milton, in the words of Mark Pattison, 'conceives a poet to be one who employs his imagination to make a revelation of truth, truth which the poet himself entirely believes.' And when he employs fictitious names and describes material actions it is but as symbolism of that higher reality which transcends human perception and comprehension. It must be admitted that Milton did supplement imaginatively (in the current sense) the outline of received fact. The allegory of Satan's meeting with Sin and Death, to which Dr. Johnson strenuously objected, is an instance. So, the incidental personification of Chaos and Night, and of Rumour, Chance, Tumult, Confusion and Discord is a survival of the conventions of mediæval fiction. But that allegorical elaboration may co-exist with a firm conviction of the truth of the subject matter of a work of art may be seen in the case of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

So much for historical criticism; now, what is to be the attitude of the future toward the greatest epic of the

¹⁶ *P. L.*, I, 732-748. Cf. also *P. L.* I, 364-375.

English language? The thought of *Paradise Lost*, at least for many, 'can never again be accepted as a literally veracious account of the creation and the fall.' For this reason the poem can probably never again hold quite the place, especially in the popular mind, that it once had. But there is left, for scholars at least, the path of historical receptiveness, and the appreciation of *Paradise Lost* at its maximum will be the reward of the scholar. If we cannot accept Milton's theology, we should be willing, in the words of Professor Trent, 'to realize it imaginatively.' While Milton thought he was writing about a real universe, we can accept it sympathetically as a conventional, imaginary one; just as we accept the supernatural in *Hamlet*, and the fairy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*.

It would be unfair, however, in re-emphasizing the earlier interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, to underestimate the contributions of recent criticism. Beyond what seemed to Milton the reality, material or immaterial, of his characters, there loomed the moral and spiritual meaning which they embodied. By restricting himself to this phase of criticism Professor Thompson has made an important contribution to our understanding of *Paradise Lost*. My objection to his view is solely to his assumption that this interpretation practically covers the field, and that it embraces Milton's own complete view of his epic. As a dramatic poem excels an allegory, because in addition to its abstract or moral significance, it contains the attraction of concrete personalities and the complexity of real events, so to our willing aesthetic imagination the interest in the events and personages of *Paradise Lost* may be added to the value of its ideal significance. 'But though the machinery of spiritual in-

terpretation is thrown aside, the essence of it survives as a permanent gain. The value of human souls and the significance of their destiny are no longer operative as abstract principles to be clothed in allegorical fantasy, but as an added force and tenderness in the penetrative imagination.'¹⁷

In conclusion, trying to give the broadest possible interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, I would define it as an artificial epic, embodying structurally a theistic and Biblical view of the universe; but including also a superb portrayal of a type of individualism; supreme in its poetic realization of the ideal of pastoral literature; and exemplifying an idealistic system of ethics, which emphasizes the doctrine of free will. In addition to this, it is written with the greatest loftiness and sublimity of style, the reflex of a mind of unsurpassable grandeur. That the poem has, like *Hamlet*, such a breadth of suggestiveness, and elements that are of interest to such a variety of types of mind, is an evidence of its enduring greatness.

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¹⁷ Bosanquet, *History of Aesthetic*, p. 161.